Fatal Second Helen

A Veteran's *Iliad*

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CHAPTER 1

An Argument

A good translation for the first word of the *Iliad* is *wrath*. The ancient Greek word here is *mênis* (μῆνις). This word choice is intentional and would have had an impact on the Greek audiences who listened to this story. Imagine a dark evening with a bard standing by a large fire outdoors, the stars brightly arrayed behind him, an audience silently arrayed before him. There is a calm before he starts; everyone is waiting with hushed breath. The silence lengthens, the bard is still, his head is down. Then he sings out: "WRATH!" And with that very first word, dramatically delivered, the bard sets the tone and begins the story.

"Wrath" works so well for *mênis* because this ancient Greek word is almost exclusively used for gods. "Wrath" is frequently connected to the divine in English as well (think "wrath of God"). In this first sentence of the Iliad, the wrath belongs to Achilles, a mortal. Homer is signaling to us that Achilles, in his anger, is godlike. In Wilson's translation the first word is "Goddess," reminding us that in the ancient Greek mind, the bards who sang the Iliad to their audiences were conduits for the Muses. Homer, humbly, takes no credit for the creation of the Iliad; the goddess, the Muse Calliope, sings through him. Thus, the first line: "Goddess, sing of the cataclysmic wrath of Achilles."

Book 1 of the Iliad starts in the tenth year of war[1] between the

1 The *Iliad* takes place during the tenth year, so nine full years have elapsed, but the full tenth year has not been completed at the time of the story.

Greeks and the Trojans. To this point, the Trojans have generally refused to fight the Greeks because they fear Achilles so much. The Greeks are not exactly besieging Troy — people are still able to go in and out of the city — but they are encamped nearby and posing a constant threat. That they have been doing this for ten years is more of a mythic trope than any attempt to reflect reality. Greek mythology enjoys using the span of ten years to indicate a long time. An earlier war between the Greek gods, the Titanomachy, also lasts ten years; it takes Odysseus ten years to get home. This is somewhat similar to the Bible's use of forty: Noah on the ark for forty days, Moses and Jesus fasting for forty days, the Israelites wandering the desert for forty years.

In addition to posing a threat to Troy, the Greeks are raiding nearby villages. They do this to kill time and to get plunder. As Book 1 explains, one of these raids resulted in the abduction of Chryseis, the daughter of a priest of Apollo named Chryses, who lives in the town of Chryse. The action of raiding these villages fits well within the archaeological picture of the area around Troy in the Late Bronze Age. Several small villages and towns have been identified in the archaeological record in the broader region, and it is likely that many more existed that left no trace. What does not make sense is that these towns and villages would have been a source of great plunder. They were much more likely simple farming communities. The amount of gold to be had would have been negligible. What makes more sense is that the Greeks were raiding the countryside in an effort to feed their massive army. Homer, eager to show his heroes gloriously wreaking havoc in the Trojan countryside, was likely not interested in focusing on these details.

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Chryses, the priest, comes to the Greek camp asking for the return of his daughter, who has been given to Agamemnon. Agamemnon not only refuses but is disrespectful and shouts Chryses out of the camp. This is our introduction to Agamemnon, and it lets us see

immediately what type of leader he is: haughty, selfish, brusque. Chryses goes home and prays to Apollo to punish the Greeks, which Apollo does by shooting plague arrows into the camp, spreading deadly disease for ten days (another mythological unit of ten). The Greeks recognize that they angered Apollo and, led by Achilles, consult a seer named Calchas to figure out why. This is our introduction to Achilles, a man people go to for protection and who gives it without hesitation, though this is about to change.

Calchas knows what is going on, and he knows what kind of man Agamemnon is. He asks Achilles to protect him from any fallout from his explanation before he gives it, and Achilles immediately agrees. In these opening scenes of the *Iliad*, we begin to see the lay of the land. Agamemnon and Achilles are immediately presented as the leaders, and almost immediately they are at odds with each other. Calchas explains that it was Agamemnon's keeping of Chryseis and abuse of her priestly father that angered Apollo and resulted in the death by plague of many Greeks, mules, and dogs. Agamemnon does not like hearing this, though he grudgingly offers to give Chryseis back. In return, he demands that someone else give up their enslaved girl to replace her. Achilles cannot stand this display of greed. He and Agamemnon argue, with Agamemnon threatening to take Achilles' enslaved girl, Briseis, and Achilles threatening to withdraw from battle. At one point Achilles tells Agamemnon: "You dress in shame!" (W 1.201, H 1.149) and calls him a "dog-face" (W 1.215, H 1.159), giving us a taste of good Homeric insults. One of Wilson's many strengths as a translator is capturing the meaning of insults and giving them to us in straightforward English.

Achilles gets so worked up that he starts to pull out his sword to kill Agamemnon. The goddess Athena appears and yanks him back by his hair, stopping him. They have a conversation, which must have been a bit confusing to the onlookers, as only Achilles could see and hear Athena. She convinces him that he cannot win and must give up Briseis. Achilles is tough, but he knows not

to go against the goddess of war. He declares to the Greeks that, because of this treatment, neither he nor the warriors he brought in his ships, the Myrmidons, will continue to fight. He withdraws to his tent, where two Greeks, Eurybates and Talthybius, come and take Briseis away. Achilles is devastated and weeps, drawing his goddess mother Thetis to appear and comfort him. Through his tears he begs her to ask Zeus to favor the Trojans in battle, so that Agamemnon will regret his actions. Thetis goes to Zeus, sitting on his throne on Mount Olympus, and begs him to punish the Greeks. Zeus assents with a bow of his head, and now the real trouble begins.

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This opening to the *Iliad* introduces two significant themes. The first is that of a parent coming for his or her child. The *Iliad* opens with this theme and closes with it. The poem is highly aware of the emotions that connect parents and children and uses them to great effect. We have Chryses and his daughter Chryseis, but they get very little attention after this scene; they exist to start the story. More importantly in Book 1, we have Achilles and his mother Thetis. Modern society does not often present warriors weeping to their mothers because they were mistreated, but to the ancient Greeks, Achilles was the pinnacle of manliness. His show of emotion is used to emphasize just how devastated he is at the way Agamemnon has treated him. As we see later, Achilles does not calm down easily, but his mother has the power to soothe him. Thetis' love and her ability to help her living son only makes the end of the *Iliad*, when Priam does what he can to help his dead son, all the more emotional to read.

The second theme is pride. Both Agamemnon and Achilles are acting to protect their pride, and both are so blinded by this effort that they are completely unconcerned with the consequences. Agamemnon's behavior in particular has prompted Jonathan Shay, psychiatrist and author of *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma*

and the Undoing of Character (1994), to argue that Agamemnon's prideful desire to make up for the loss of Chryseis leads him to break the moral order upon which any functional army depends. That it is broken by the commanding general (a generous term for Agamemnon, but I will address that later) makes the repercussions all the more destructive.

Anyone who has been in the military knows the unique authority superior officers have over their subordinates. The civilian world does not have a real equivalent to this. The United States military has its own additional law code, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, which serves to, among other things, protect and enforce the authority of senior military personnel. If you disobey your boss in the civilian world, there may be consequences, you may even get fired, but it is rare that a law has been broken. If you disobey your superior officer in the military world, you are breaking Article 90 and may be subject to a court-martial.[2]

> Article 90
> Any person subject to this chapter who– (1) strikes his superior commissioned officer or draws or lifts up any weapon or offers any violence against him while he is in the execution of his office; or (2) willfully disobeys a lawful command of his superior commissioned officer; shall be punished, if the offense is committed in time of war, by death or such other punishment as a court-martial may direct, and if the offense is committed at any other time, by such punishment, other than death, as a court-martial may direct.[3]

A court-martial is a military trial (think of the movie *A Few Good Men* [1992] but less dramatic), and proceedings rarely reach that level. More commonly the offending service member will get what is called an NJP (non-judicial punishment — called "Article

2 Disobeying an enlisted leader is covered by a different Article.

3 https://ucmj.us/890-article-90-assaulting-or-willfully-disobeying-superior-commissioned-officer/

15" in the Army), which is decided by the commanding officer and can result in confinement to barracks, extra duties, loss of pay, demotion, and other unpleasant consequences. Because they are at the discretion of the commanding officer, NJPs can be handed out easily and without much process. Again, the civilian world does not have a real equivalent to this. Speeding tickets come close, perhaps, but those are simply a fine. NJPs frequently affect quality of life and can last for weeks or months.

In a military environment, where authority figures have such power and control over those beneath them, the abuse of that power becomes magnified. It is not just the level of authority; it is also the extent. Being a service member is not a nine-to-five job; it is a way of life. You can get called in on the weekend, you can get awakened in the middle of the night, you can work past dinner and into the evening, you can start the day well before breakfast. And this is normal military life. In a combat zone all of this still applies, and in addition there are no more weekends, no vacation, and time off usually means it's time to rack out (go to sleep) before you're right back in it.

When the abuse of authority occurs in a combat zone, where decisions have life or death consequences, the abuse becomes magnified once again, and the opportunity to get a break from it shrinks to zero. Like all human beings, members of the military feel safest when things are predictable. In combat, predictability falls away and is replaced by the worst thing possible: life-threatening surprises. Because of this, when troops are not in combat they often embrace predictable, patterned behaviors all the more. A major part of the predictable, comfortable pause in combat missions Shay's moral order. You may not like your officers and senior enlisted, but their behavior should at least be predictable and should fit into what you believe to be "right." For instance, you know that wearing your uniform wrong pisses off Sergeant Major, or that the Captain flips out if you're late. They overreact to things, but they have a point: It is useful for the unit when people

are on time. When a superior exercises his or her authority in unpredictable, punitive ways (often due to high emotion, just like Agamemnon), this is very threatening. When it breaks the moral code — that is, when they abuse their authority in a way that is not "right" — then the real damage happens. Morale plummets, and trust along with it. Resentment builds, and now there is no safe break from combat, but instead just a different kind of danger to avoid. As Shay points out, this kind of moral order can be broken during combat operations, and that is the worst it can get. Now, not only have you lost trust in your superiors, you begin to believe they don't care about your safety or your life.

Agamemnon knows that with Achilles' withdrawal, more Greeks will die. Achilles knows this too and, in fact, has his mother beg Zeus to make it happen. Both leaders brush past this, as the lives of the troops are of less concern to them than they are to modern-day military officers. There are several reasons for this. One is that this is literature, and the development of the story is more important than representing leaders as morally driven or even fully realistic characters. Another is that Agamemnon and Achilles should not really be viewed as generals. They are aristocrats, born to their rank. They do lead the war in a way somewhat similar to modern-day military leaders, in that they have full command. They do not, however, bear this command because they rose to it on merit, as commanding officers do today. They do so because they are wealthy and were born into nobility. Later I will talk about the term *aristeia*, which is a scene where a hero performs at his absolute best. Several heroes from the *Iliad* have an *aristeia*, and this term is from the same root as "aristocrat." Both come from the Greek *arete* (ἀρετή), meaning excellence. The connection is that the aristocrats, the nobles, are the excellent ones ("aristocracy" is literally "rule/power of the excellent ones"), who can have excellent moments (*aristeia*). They are not overly concerned with the troops they lead; they are more concerned with their personal glory. More on this in Chapter Two.

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After Zeus agrees to Thetis' request, he hurries her away from Olympus before his wife (and sister), Hera, sees her. Hera "is always scolding me" (W 1.674, H 1.519), he explains, and he knows she will not like his decision to aid the Trojans, nor his chatting with another goddess. Zeus is the biggest womanizer in Greek mythology. Additionally, Zeus is, ostensibly, neutral in the Trojan War, but Hera sides closely with the Greeks. She has no problem standing up for herself and challenging him, and this plays out as his effort to conceal the meeting fails. Hera figures things out immediately and angrily confronts him. Only when he threatens to beat her up does she relent.

After this we have another parent-child scene, when Hephaestus, the god of fire and metalwork and Hera's son by Zeus, comes to comfort her. He gets her to smile, and soon Olympus is full of gods feasting and listening to music while they laugh at Hephaestus. They laugh because Hephaestus is crippled from when Zeus threw him out of heaven. To the perfect gods, any imperfection is fascinating and ridiculed; Hephaestus serves almost as a jester, though how willingly he takes on this role is unclear. The *Iliad* also tells us here that the homes to which the gods go after the feast were all built splendidly by Hephaestus, offering up a compliment to follow the insult.

Book 1 of the *Iliad* closes with all the gods asleep in their Hephaestus-built homes, including Zeus, who sleeps beside Hera. This is a bit odd, given that the first line of Book 2 tells us that Zeus did not sleep that night, kept awake thinking of Thetis' request. This is not of great importance; the *Iliad* has its inconsistencies, which are usually chalked up to the fact that it is a product of many authors and many years.